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Creating a SANCTuary of Learning Spaces in Universities

Teaching for Diversity in Use of Spaces, both Physical and Virtual to Ensure a Best Learning and Inclusive Experience for Students

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Introduction

The SANCT Model as per Vollmer (2016) suggests that certain elements are necessary for the support of learning in spaces, being – Self-esteem, Autonomy, Normality, Control and moTivation. The SANCT model can be applied to university spaces to ensure a SANCTuary of optimum spaces for users to enjoy. These spaces create a community for students and staff within safe boundaries and the desire is that these boundaries will be permeable to the general community through extended campus initiatives. The SANCT elements must be planned for and sustained in the design of university spaces, both physical and virtual to encourage the enjoyment of space by local users in the form of students, staff and outsider users in the form of community and professional visitors. The people are the most important part of every university and the spaces must meet the unique learning needs of the users who occupy them. The spaces must wrap around the people to keep them physically and emotionally safe with a sense of identity and belonging being encouraged by the distinct entity of university spaces.

Method

Qualitative research undertaken at Cork Institute of Technology, University College Cork and University College London assesses the user experience of learning spaces in new builds and refurbishments of buildings in three Universities situated in Ireland and the United Kingdom. There is an ecology to these buildings (Becker et al., 1973) and these spaces are an embodiment of the metamorphosis of our society. The culture of a university impacts society and vice versa universities are shaped by where society is at a given point in time with our spaces moving from traditional to newer, more modern space incorporating technological advancements (Cook V. A., Hemming P. J., 2011). How do students and staff feel about and connect with these spaces on a day-to-day basis and how can university leaders nurture these connections in a healthy and meaningful way? This paper addresses

these questions and applies an architectural psychology perspective to the data to examine the impact of space on the psyches of users.

Findings

The spaces themselves must perform a role in universities as they are not a passive element where students and teachers simply sit and learn but rather they are an active, living and essential element to the shared learning experience of staff and students. To embrace this expectation of our classrooms we must listen to the users on what aspects of a learning space they say are supporting this collaborative learning experience and also what elements of spaces are weakening the effectiveness of learning and teaching. A Design Theory analysis is adopted here to narrowly focus the perspective on the user experience of the moment, this brings two advantages, firstly a voice is being given to the users of today on their views of spaces and secondly it grounds effective planning for spaces for users of the future. Carnell has recognised that the impact of space is not limited to the students within its walls but also the general community and future students. (Carnell, 2017).

Several key themes emerge from the individual data sets of the three universities, these themes seem to be unique from each other, based mainly on the function and ages of the spaces in question. For newer spaces users gave views shining a light on – facilities and services within the building, aesthetics of the building, student experience of the building thus far, whereas for older spaces users emphasised – flexibility of spaces, challenges and barriers for use of spaces, training needs arising for users of spaces. The data shows that the learning space is an aspect so pervasive that it changes the experience of both the teacher and the student and this is supported by academic commentary. (Jamieson, 2003). The space is capable of making the experience an empowering, inspirational, collaborative event or on the contrary; a stagnant, tedious endurance, depending greatly on the dimensions and attributes of the space. (Jamieson et al., 2000).

Conclusions

The users of university spaces want to be inspired by them in their learning, through innovative teaching in spaces, movability of furniture and opportunities for collaborative discussion and work. The SANCT model prompts us towards ensuring the users have a voice in the design and use of space but the value lies not only in gathering the views but also in putting concrete action plans in place to ensure inclusive authentic learning for all.

Three key learning points

1. The people are the most important part of every university and the spaces must meet the unique and individual needs of the users who occupy them, to ensure inclusive and accessible learning and teaching.
2. University learning spaces must wrap around people to keep them physically, psychologically and emotionally safe, instilling within all the users of the space a sense of identity and belonging.
3. The SANCT elements (Self-esteem, Autonomy, Normality, Control and moTivation) as per Vollmer (2016) must be planned for and sustained in the design of university spaces, both physical and virtual.

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